

Can You Believe It?
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
April 9, 2023 Easter Sunday
Psalm 118; Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 20:1-18

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Easter Sunday. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online, and to Annemieke McLane, Rachel Guaraldi and the Rev. Deadra Ashton who are co-leading the service. We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We give thanks to be allowed to share in the bounty of this place and to protect it in the spirit of indigenous wisdom.

Imagine strangers meeting at the empty tomb that first Easter morning, hearing the wild story of the risen Christ and wondering if this miracle could be true. Imagine how sharing that experience would make them not be strangers anymore. If you were at the tomb, or even if you were on Zoom on a disciple's phone, you would want to connect with everyone there because the more you shared it with one another the more you would feel the joyous hope that something as beautiful and good as the love of Jesus can be stronger than death.

Jesus wanted us to feel this love and oneness, so after the service please see one another not as strangers but “as part of yourself you do not yet know,”* and reach out to make sure every person here feels included in the joy of loving community, in person and on Zoom. [*Valerie Kaur, *See No Stranger*]

Call to Worship: I have one more announcement... “LENT IS OVER!” We have emerged from the wilderness into a day of celebration. It is a day to put resurrection and new life above all else. Let those facing trials hand everything over to God because this day proclaims that the Spirit's power to renew and restore is greater than any earthly power, including death itself. So do not worry about anything! Forget confessing your sins today—you are forgiven!

The resurrection has released a force of cosmic light into the world that nothing can overcome. If you do not feel joy today, try acting joyful anyway, in the hope that with God's

help your behavior will change your attitude. Let us join in worship together with reckless abandon and loud jubilation!

It takes poetry to do this day justice. Here are the words of ee cummings. Let us pray...

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

Amen.

Can You Believe It?

Rod Smolla confessed a few Sundays ago
that basketball is his other religion.
Sports were taken that seriously
in my family, too, so this year
when Fairleigh Dickinson beat Purdue
in the March Madness basketball tournament
I knew exactly how the announcer felt
when he yelled, “Do you believe it???”
It was only the second time in history
that a last seed upset a first,
and this time Purdue was a giant, a Goliath—
and Fairleigh Dickinson, a little David with a slingshot.

We can imagine Fairleigh Dickinson fans
turning to one another like Red Sox announcer
Joe Castiglione who says after every miraculous win,
“Can you believe it?”

We can imagine Mary Magdalene sprinting
through the Jerusalem streets that Easter morning
after seeing her beloved Jesus alive, bursting with joy,
racing to get to the other disciples
so she could tell them, “I saw him! I talked with him!
He is alive! Can you believe it?”

But the fact is, not everyone *could* believe it.
The disciples were not convinced
until Jesus showed them his wounds,
according to John.

As the story spread, far fewer people believed
than disbelieved. Romans considered the church
a dangerous cult. The church might have died out
except for one thing:
the Spirit that filled Jesus filled those
who believed that the Spirit was real.
They opened to it, and gave their lives to it,
and that Spirit made them capable
of the kind of miraculously charitable,
generous-hearted, self-giving love
that Jesus had, so they became famous
for acts of kindness and healing,
for standing up for justice for the oppressed,
for nonviolence and the things that make for peace.

Their all-inclusive love took in outcasts,
supported the vulnerable, fed the hungry.
They built foodbank warehouses
that were bigger than their churches.
Sometimes the Roman Empire
would pause from suspecting and killing Christians

as subversive revolutionaries
and ask churches to serve as the Empire's
official welfare agency. Love won!
Can you believe it?

A friend told me recently that he was not sure
he should be part of his church anymore
because he doesn't believe the things
he thinks church people are supposed to believe.
Many years ago Mike Manheim preached a sermon
from this pulpit that people still remember entitled,
"You Don't Really Believe All That Stuff, Do You?"

Many churches today insist that their members
state publicly that they do believe all that stuff.
Believe and you are included and promised
a ticket to heaven, disbelieve and you are excluded
and "cast into hell fire where the worm dieth not,
and the fire is not quenched." (Mark 9:47-48)

Maybe you feel like my friend,
unable to believe everything
that some churches proclaim, and
maybe like me you are unable to believe
that excluding and hating people
who do not share those beliefs
is what Jesus would do.

We are looking at two different meanings
to the question "Can you believe it?" One is loaded
with consequences of being saved or being damned,
of belonging or not belonging,
and the other meaning is loaded
with overwhelming joy at the miracle
of love overcoming all odds,
the joy of extraordinary hospitality
and generosity to those others have shut out.
Can you believe it?

Those who were last now are first!
Those who were lost now are found!
Those who were blind now can see!
“i who have died am alive again today!”
Can you believe it? Can you believe
this amazing grace?

I can speak only for myself,
but I don't want be part of a church
that wants me only if I believe what it believes.
As the beautiful writer and theologian Frederick Buechner
put it, “If there is no room for doubt,
there is no room for me.”
I don't want a church that thinks it is all about belief.
The church I want is the one that feels
like Fairleigh Dickinson fans when they beat Purdue.
I don't want a church that believes without a doubt
in the resurrection that happened
two thousand years ago in Palestine,
I want a church that sees the power of resurrection
in what the Spirit of the universe is doing today.
Can you believe it, that despite all we humans have done,
the spring birds are returning and singing,
and earth is waking up and getting ready to bloom!

Can you believe that I just became a grandfather?
People are having babies, and
teaching their children right and wrong
and the sacred way. The Spirit that was in Jesus
has moved Emmett and Carmen
to save up pennies and give them
to strangers suffering half way around the world,
their hearts open wide with Christ-like
unconditional compassion and love.
Can you believe it?

The only thing Jesus said it was blasphemous
not to believe in was the work of that Spirit,

the same Spirit that sparked
lifeless elements suddenly into living single cells
four billion years ago,
and then one day a billion years later brought cells
together to form a small diverse but unified community
and went on to evolve complex organisms,
the Spirit that evolved human consciousness and opposable thumbs
and all the incredibly complex and delicate engineering
that happens in a mother's womb.

Can you believe it? Can you believe what that Spirit did
flowing through Gandhi and King and Nelson Mandela?
Can you believe what that Spirit is doing flowing
through Rachel and Joey and Danette right now
out in the Parish Hall, and through the children
at their feet? Because if you can believe in that,
then you yourself can open your heart
and see how the same Spirit flows through you.
An Iberian proverb says, "Seeing is not believing;
it's the other way around. Believe. Then you will see."

We are so blessed. Look around you.
Look at all the beauty, look at all the wisdom and love,
read Roz Finn's post in the listserv yesterday
about all the neighborliness and kindness in Strafford,
look at this church's long passion for justice and peace
and saving the hurting earth.

Look at all those who have come through
times of sickness or loss or loneliness,
dark nights of soul, who have become our teachers,
who have found the light that shines in the darkness
and now share it with others to help them
through their hard times.
Can you believe how blessed we are?
Can you believe that the Spirit
can bring new life out of death again,
as it has so many times before?

That's Easter. That's all the believing in Easter you need
in order to be an instrument of that new life yourself.
And you'd better believe this world needs
what the Spirit flowing through you can give.

This church does not ask what miracles you believe,
but if you want your life
to be a miracle of the Spirit of love, we are here
to share all the struggles and joys of that journey.
So let us open our hearts wide now
in silent prayer, setting aside our reasonable doubts
with a willing suspension of disbelief,
and let us invite the Spirit to bring new life into us
so that we may shine its light into the world around us
as Jesus did and still does...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

The earth opens from day
to day preparing the way
for Spring flowers.